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September 28 2002

Turns out strange smell was due to straw builder hadn't cleaned up

Last fall I wrote in this column about a smelly cellar flood we had in our house when the sewer backed up due to blockage from tree roots.

That column produced an interesting response from a reader with a different kind of basement smell problem.

His story illustrates just one of the many things that can go wrong in constructing a new house, and how the published ratings for after-sales service by the Ontario New Home Warranty Plan (ONHWP) don't really tell the whole story.

Brian and his wife moved into their new home outside Toronto last year. They began to notice a strange smell coming from the sump pump area of the basement after it rained or when they watered their lawn.

Brian had never before lived in a home with a sump pump and wasn't quite sure why it was there.

He learned sump pumps are often installed in homes in areas where the basements are prone to flooding due to water build-up in the surrounding soil, or where the municipality wants to relieve pressure on the storm sewer system by diverting the flow of rainwater.

To install a sump pump, a hole is dug below the basement floor and water is diverted to this area by gravity, as it is the lowest point in the house.

When the groundwater level rises into the hole, the sump pump installed in the hole kicks on and diverts the water away from the foundation through a pipe installed for that purpose.

After Brian complained about the smell for four weeks, the builder sent out his assistant who tried to pour water down the sump pump with a hose.

When that failed, the builder's crew finally decided to dig, in the process breaking the main water main to the house.

The crew insisted they had found silt in the foundation area, and cleaned it up.

The smell, however, was still present even though no water was coming to the sump pump, so Brian called the building inspector. That was when the builder's crew finally admitted that the silt they had discovered was actually straw.

It seems that when builders pour concrete for basements in the winter months, they place straw around the foundation to keep the moisture away. If they do not clean it out thoroughly before filling in the earth around the foundations, the straw starts to rot and the resulting smell is transported by rainwater to the weeping tile and then the sump pump area, smelling up the house.

During the second dig, this time to get rid of all of the straw, Brian's builder's crew cut the underground phone line but succeeded in removing the straw.

The builder's crew left their hose and a brand new shovel, which Brian has appropriated as partial compensation for his troubles.

During the process, Brian complained to ONHWP.

He was also told by one person, "You should flush all your toilets sometimes the water gets stagnant and smells."

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Clearly this was not stellar advice from the industry regulator.

On its Web site, ONHWP publishes its ratings for after-sales service by its builder registrants (see <http://www.newhome.on.ca>).

When a homeowner and a builder have a dispute about a warranty item, conciliation is conducted to try to resolve the issue.

If the builder is held responsible for the item, the conciliation is recorded against the builder as "chargeable."

An excellent rating identifies builders who have no more than one chargeable conciliation in 75 new home possessions, or (for smaller builders) no chargeable conciliations in 10 or more possessions.

Brian's builder has had an excellent rating for after-sales service since early in the 1980s, with no chargeable conciliations against it.

Still, Brian is not impressed with his builder's excellent track record.

"It goes to show you," he wrote me, "that the New Home Warranty rating doesn't really mean much as far as service goes."

Since Brian lived with a smelly basement for so long, I can understand his feelings.

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